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Clueless on Global Warming

For the second time in six weeks, President Bush, having rejected the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, is headed to Europe without a strategy on global warming, an issue of deep concern to America's allies. European leaders will try to use the forthcoming Group of Eight summit meeting of industrialized nations in Genoa to persuade Mr. Bush to relax his opposition to Kyoto. Meanwhile, environmental ministers from a wider array of countries will be making the same case to Paula Dobriansky, the assistant secretary of state representing the administration at climate change talks in Bonn. The Europeans should not get their hopes up. Mr. Bush described Kyoto last month as "fatally flawed" because it would damage the American economy, and he has not changed his mind.

Ms. Dobriansky thus has the unfortunate distinction of being the first American climate change negotiator with no negotiating position. For all its flaws, the Kyoto Protocol represented an important consensus that the harmful consequences of climate change could be averted only if the nations of the world — with the richer countries taking the lead — agreed to mandatory reductions in carbon dioxide and the other gases thought to cause the warming of the earth's atmosphere. The treaty is cumbersome and its targets need refinement. But it outlined a plausible framework for action for which Mr. Bush has provided no alternative except for a few measures announced last week calling for further research. If Japan decides to ratify the treaty, America's isolation will be complete.

Fortunately, there has been a reassuring surge of interest in global warming on Capitol Hill. With the growing support of progressive voices in the electric power industry, three senators with pivotal roles in energy policy — Jim Jeffords of Vermont, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico — are pushing legislation that would reduce emissions of all four of the main pollutants from power plants, including carbon dioxide. They have also promised that any energy legislation emerging from the Senate will include serious money for energy efficiency and renewable energy sources. In addition, two senators not normally thought of as environmentalists — Ted Stevens of Alaska and Robert Byrd of West Virginia — have proposed investments in new technologies aimed at producing cleaner fuels and industrial processes.

Potentially the most important development, however, was a report from a National Academy of Sciences panel recommending a sharp improvement in fuel economy standards for cars and vehicles classed as light trucks, like the popular but inefficient S.U.V.'s. The recommendations, disclosed in Tuesday's Times by Keith Bradsher, are noteworthy because the panel was dominated by industry representatives and because Mr. Bush has promised to pay attention to its findings. Fuel economy standards have not been raised in 17 years. Indeed, the average miles per gallon of the American fleet have actually declined because of the popularity of S.U.V.'s and minivans.

Scientists believe that improving vehicle mileage would be the biggest contribution

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America could make to cutting emissions of global warming gases. Cars and light trucks consume about 40 percent of the oil used in the United States and account for more than one-fifth of the carbon dioxide emissions. The panel recommends that the fuel economy of all new vehicles be raised as much as 11 miles per gallon over the next 10 years, a 40 percent improvement over today's levels.

That is a more ambitious target than anything the automobile industry or Mr. Bush has agreed to. Nevertheless, the recommendations will give a boost to the Democrats and moderate Republicans who plan to introduce fuel economy legislation, and it certainly puts the administration on the spot. Vice President Dick Cheney, chastened by criticism of the administration's resource-driven energy strategy, is now saying all sorts of nice things about the need for conservation. The administration's response on fuel economy will say much about whether he means what he says.

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